

FIJI 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. It also mandates the separation of religion and state. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation and inciting hatred or “disaffection” against any religious group. Religious groups must register with the government. A law on education permits noncompulsory religious instruction in schools owned and operated by various religious denominations. The senior management of a leading newspaper was acquitted in May of charges related to publishing a letter to the editor that the government characterized as antagonistic toward the country’s Muslim community.

There were four acts of vandalism at Hindu temples in January. According to the *Fiji Sun* daily newspaper, the country experienced a proliferation of anti-Muslim comments on social media in the lead-up to the November 14 national election.

Embassy officials held meetings with senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government officials to promote religious tolerance, in addition to meetings with Christian, Hindu, and Muslim religious leaders with the aim of encouraging and maintaining an active interfaith dialogue. The embassy used social media to highlight U.S. support of religious diversity in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 926,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2007 census, approximately 64.5 percent of the population is Christian, 28 percent Hindu, and 6.3 percent Muslim. The largest Christian denomination is the Methodist Church. Other Protestant denominations account for 10.4 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 9.1 percent, and other Christian groups 10.4 percent. There are small communities of Baha’is, Sikhs, and Jews.

Religious affiliation runs largely along ethnic lines. According to the 2007 census, most *iTaukei* (indigenous Fijian) citizens, who constitute 57 percent of the population, are Christian. The majority of the country’s traditional chiefs belong to the Methodist Church, which remains influential among indigenous people, particularly in rural areas where 49 percent of the population lives. Most Indian Fijians, who account for 37 percent of the total population, are Hindu, while an

estimated 20 percent are Muslim and 6 percent Christian. Approximately 60 percent of the small Chinese community is Christian. The small community of mixed European and Fijian ancestry is predominantly Christian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes a secular state and protects freedom of religion, conscience, and belief. The government may limit these rights by law to protect the freedoms of others, or for reasons of public safety, order, morality, health, or nuisance. The constitution also mandates separation of religion and state. Citizens have the right, either individually or collectively, in public and private, to manifest their religion or beliefs in worship, observance, practice, or teaching. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and laws make inciting hatred or “disaffection” against religious groups a criminal offense. The constitution provides that individuals may not assert religious belief as a reason for disobeying the law. The constitution places limits on proselytizing on government premises and at government functions.

By law, religious groups must register with the government through trustees who may then hold land or property for the groups. To register, religious bodies must submit applications to the registrar of titles office. Applications must include names and identification of the trustees, signed by the head of the religious body to be registered, a copy of the constitution of the proposed religious body, land title documents for the land used by the religious body, and a registration fee of 2.30 Fiji dollars (\$1). Registered religious bodies may receive an exemption from taxes after approval from the national tax agency, on the condition they operate in a nonprofit and noncompetitive capacity. By law, religious bodies that hold land or property must register their houses of worship, including their land, and show proof of title. There is no mention in the law of religious organizations that do not hold land.

Permits are required for any public meeting on public property organized by religious groups, outside of regular religious services and houses of worship.

There is no required religious instruction under the law. Private or religious groups sometimes own or manage school properties, but the Ministry of Education administers and regulates the curriculum. The law allows religious groups the right to establish, maintain, and manage places of education, whether or not they

receive financial assistance from the state, provided the institution maintains educational standards prescribed by law. The law permits noncompulsory religious instruction in all schools, enabling schools owned and operated by various religious denominations but receiving government support to offer religious instruction. Schools may incorporate religious elements, such as class prayer, as long as they do not force teachers to participate, and students may be excused should their parents request it. The government provides funding and education assistance to public schools, including schools owned and operated by religious organizations, on a per pupil basis. Some schools maintain their religious and/or ethnic origin, but they remain open to all students. According to the law, the government ensures free tuition for primary and secondary schools.

The country ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in August, and the covenant entered into force in November.

Government Practices

On May 22, the Suva High Court acquitted three staff members of the *Fiji Times* newspaper and the author of a letter to the editor on charges of sedition for violating a law that prohibits publishing articles that incite and cause dislike, hatred, and antagonism toward any community. The charges stemmed from a letter to the editor published in 2016 in the *Fiji Times*' indigenous language edition that prosecutors originally said incited communal antagonism against the Muslim community.

In October the *Fiji Times* reported that in the run-up to national elections in November, the majority of political parties said race and religion were issues that mattered to the people and were raised and expressed by the people. Sitiveni Rabuka, the leader of the opposition Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) said the prime minister was wrong in suggesting that SODELPA was “for the *iTaukei*,” (who are mostly Christian). Rabuka said his party affirmed the freedom and dignity of all ethnicities and religions.

According to the *Fiji Sun*, 60 percent of 1,000 persons interviewed in an October poll said the opposition was using race or religion in its election campaign. In July the *Fiji Sun* reported a Nukuloa resident said a provisional candidate of the National Federation Party opposition told him the attorney general, who is Muslim, will “make everyone a Muslim” if the governing Fiji First Party won in the election.

Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and other cabinet ministers continued to emphasize religious tolerance during public addresses at home and overseas. They stated the country is a multifaith nation with religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution and it must unite to defend the rights of citizens to practice their religion. Prior to its ratification, in May the parliament held public consultations on the ICCPR, including treaty provisions on religious freedom, with civil society and human rights organizations, political parties, and the public.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January the Hindu organization Shree Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha increased security at Hindu temples because of four acts of vandalism. The Council of Churches, government, and police issued statements condemning the acts. No arrests were made.

The *Fiji Sun* reported the country experienced a proliferation of anti-Muslim comments on social media in the lead-up to the November 14 national election.

In November some Catholic parishes celebrated Diwali at a special Mass they stated was to show respect to Hindus. Archbishop Peter Loy Chong said such a Mass would be held at the cathedral and stated, “Fiji is blessed with a diversity of religious traditions. May our religious diversities be a source of strength, unity, and richness.” He added that religion had public value and could not be confined to the private sphere.

Also in November interfaith leaders teamed up in campaigns to mark the “16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women and Children.” The campaign also included a 60-second commercial showing church leaders naming gender-based violence as a sin and which was shown in cinemas and on national television.

The Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as Hindu and Muslim groups operated numerous schools, including secondary schools, which were eligible for government subsidies based on the size of the student population.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials promoted religious tolerance in meetings with government officials and local religious leaders.

Embassy officials met with Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious leaders to discuss the importance of respect for religious freedom as a universal human right.

The embassy utilized social media to promote religious pluralism and tolerance, such as posts highlighting diverse religious traditions.